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SUBJECT: LIBERALS, TRADITIONALISTS BOTH EXPRESS THEIR DOUBTS OVER NEW GOVERNMENT

REF: A. AMMAN 2890

[1](#)B. AMMAN 2851

Classified By: CDA David Hale for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Both liberal activists and their traditionalist opponents here voice reservations about the new Jordanian cabinet. Liberals have hailed the strong rhetorical emphasis on reform, but doubt the new government will be able to match its words with action. At the same time, traditionalist East Bankers have expressed strong reservations about reform-minded ministers (particularly Bassem Awadallah) who they claim are out of touch with "real" Jordanians. Thirty-four MPs have pledged to withhold their votes of confidence in the new government for PM Badran's failure to consult with them and for excluding ministerial candidates from the south. Some local press, for the first time, have questioned the King's traditional prerogative of choosing new cabinets behind closed doors, asking whether the time has come for a more democratic process. End Summary.

REFORM EMPHASIS WELCOMED

[1](#)2. (C) The new Jordanian cabinet has been at the center of attention in the local media and West Amman salons since its announcement on April 7. In reviewing the King's letter of designation (ref B) and subsequent statements from the palace, most Jordanians have agreed that the King's desire to push forward the reform agenda was a primary factor in his appointment of the new government. This emphasis on reform has been welcomed by human rights and political activists contacted by post. Several activists noted their respect for new PM Adnan Badran as a distinguished academic and known advocate of reform, and were hopeful that the carry-over of reform-minded ministers from the last cabinet, such as Asma Khader and Salah Al-Bashir, signified that the new government would be more "serious" and unified in its commitment to achieve real change.

[1](#)3. (C) Most activists, however, sounded a strong note of caution, stating that they had grown weary of past reform promises that had "amounted to nothing." "We don't really care who is prime minister or in the cabinet as long as they can finally shake things up," said one contact, reflecting the views of many. Some also cast doubt on the reform credentials of certain ministers, including Deputy PM and Minister for Political Development Hisham al-Tel who is reported to have had a strong hand (as former head of the prime ministry's legislative unit) in drafting the poorly-received draft laws on political parties and professional associations. (NOTE: In al-Tel's defense, we note he was likely working under government orders. END NOTE.) Most activists and political analysts we talked to questioned whether Badran and his team had the political skills and savvy to implement reform over the objections of strong traditionalist forces.

EAST BANKER CONCERN

[1](#)4. (C) Conservative East Bank tribal sheikhs and MPs contacted by poloff also had their enthusiasm under control. While making clear that they supported the King, they nevertheless grumbled that the new cabinet was comprised of too many technocrats who "do not understand real Jordanians." The choice of Bassem Awadallah for Minister of Finance was a particular sore point. All claimed to back reform in general, but at the same time most advised that reform be carried out "gradually" and in a way that did not "disrupt" Jordanian society and culture.

[1](#)5. (SBU) Hardcore East Bank nationalist Nahed Hatter captured some concerns of the East Bank old-guard in a recent commentary in Arabic-daily Al-Arab Al-Yawm. While professing support for reform, Hatter expressed fear that the new

government might "limit" the reform process to increasing the representation of "refugees" (i.e., Jordanians of Palestinian origin), minority groups and women, and to "surrendering" the Jordanian economy to "foreign interests" at the expense of Jordanian citizens.

STRONG WORDS FROM PARLIAMENT

16. (U) On April 10, a group of 34 of the 110 members of the Lower House of parliament signed a public statement complaining that the legislature was not consulted during the formation of the new government, and promising to withhold their votes of confidence in the next parliamentary session. In the strongly worded letter, the MPs described the composition of the new government as an "affront to the deputies, their will and their feelings, as it comprises ministers who created tension between the Parliament and the former government." (NOTE: MP Jalil Maaytah (East Banker, Kerak) publicly named Bassem Awadallah and Salah Bashir as the ministers in question. END NOTE.) The MPs, who mainly hail from the southern governorates, also said that the cabinet contradicted what they called "royal directives" to represent all areas of Jordan in that it excluded ministerial candidates from the south. The statement continued to blast the new economic team, charging that these ministers "have no interaction or contact with the concerns of the Jordanian people, in addition to the reality of those people."

17. (C) Outside of the disgruntled MPs from the south, other legislators privately voiced frustration that they were once again ignored by the palace in the selection of cabinet ministers. Several had hoped, if not expected, that the new government would include at least one MP, even if only as a symbolic nod to the importance of Parliament in advancing reform. Dr. Ibrahim Badran, head of the International Relations department at Philadelphia University (and no relation to the new PM), told poloff that he and many of his colleagues admired the U.S. system of individually confirming cabinet secretaries as this gave legitimacy to the selection process and instilled in the legislative branch a sense of responsibility and inclusion. He said this was sorely lacking in the Jordanian system.

A QUESTIONING PRESS

18. (C) In comparison to the reception given to previous new cabinets (including accolades for the "reformist" October 2003 cabinet of ex-PM Fayez), the tone of the local media has been noticeably more critical of the incoming ministerial line-up. While part of this is due to the presence of several controversial personalities in the new cabinet, the press appears more willing than ever to question the very process by which the King dissolves and forms governments at will, and behind closed doors. Liberal editorialist (and Christian East Banker) Jamil Nimri wrote in Al-Arab Al-Yawm, for example, that the traditional method of choosing governments in Jordan was "no longer convincing or acceptable." He observed a "growing gap" between democratic reform and the "autocratic content" of Jordanian governments. Reflecting the private views held by several of our reformist contacts, he wrote: "The formation of the government here does not belong to the era of democracy, which means elected governments. The people choose their deputies and the deputies choose their governments."

COMMENT

19. (C) Initial reaction to PM Badran and his team indicates that the new government will not have much of a honeymoon period. With liberals impatiently demanding change and traditionalists afraid of losing political leverage, the cabinet will have to walk a careful line. Relations with a testy parliament will require particular attention so as to avoid derailment of the new cabinet's legislative agenda.

10. (U) Minimize considered.
HALE